

# CHAPTER ONE



## BEGINNING WITH BOTH IN MIND

### THE BITTER AND THE SWEET

The aroma of Guatemalan coffee began to wake me up as I looked down on the hazy valley below. This was a place I had come to love; not just for the beauty, but for the people, the food, the culture, and the work—the beautiful, messy, heartbreaking work.

The air was still a bit cool and damp, as if it were trying to distract me from what was to come. But I knew better. Soon the temperatures would rise with a vengeance, and the air would become thick and unforgiving, dripping with humidity. But for now, it was just perfect. And I soaked up every single, fleeting second.

But as much as I enjoyed this Central American country, it was also a place that had taught me hard lessons about that thin line between life and death. How the lack of food and clean water affects even the tiniest of lives.

On one of my many visits, I met a little boy named Lex, who had been buried alive just days after his birth and saved by a neighbor. I attended the funeral of a baby boy we had tried to

help just the day before. He fell ill during the night and died on the way to the hospital. Seeing his mother standing over his small casket was more than I could take—too much pain and sorrow to absorb in the space of a moment—and something I will never forget.

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I held a little boy whose skin was about to burst with the fluid building up in his body. Local doctors informed the family he

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had cancer and would not make it. We did not want to give up on this child and were determined to get him help. But days later, he passed away. I could tell you the stories of so many others—Diego, Margarite, Jose. For some, our help arrived too late. But for others, we were just in time.

More than any other place I have traveled, Guatemala is where I learned about the lives of those living in extreme poverty and how that poverty robs people of choices. And how, if left uninterrupted, it would become a vicious cycle that continues on for generations.

Despite all the things I loved about Guatemala, my heart could not ignore its dark side: how the lives of so many were cut short, just because they lacked access to basic resources. This place—the contagious joy and the overwhelming sorrow of it—had profoundly affected me.

## THE END OF MISSIONS

I was 12 when I started traveling internationally with my dad; I thought I knew what “missions” was all about. I was full of pas-

sion. I was getting to serve people in ways that would shape me forever. But I didn't truly comprehend the magnitude of what drew me to this work. I had a stereotypical understanding of the word "missions"—one that limited the scope of its intended effect. And for years, I continued to approach my work in the same well-intended but stunted way.

Years later, I found myself in Guatemala that summer morning, drinking coffee at the top of a hill overlooking the breathtaking scenery and reflecting on my life's work. What did it all really mean? I had never felt "called" to traditional missions like so many before me. I never thought God wanted me to be a full-time missionary. And yet here I was—twenty plus years in—doing what I thought was "missions" work. I was confused and restless.

I realized at that moment how tired I was of the word "missions." How it had come to communicate something to which I could no longer relate. I couldn't find what I felt so strongly about within the space of that one little word—*missions*. After hearing it so many times, it had become another Christian catchphrase that cheapened the work I believed in by reducing it to a label and a choice.

As one by one these realizations hit, my mind started spinning. I could almost feel the old, worn-out parts of my heart begin to stir. A new passion started bubbling up inside me. One that wanted to disrupt things a bit, to change the way things have been done for hundreds of years, to breathe new life into this work, and to boldly join a new kind of people on a new kind of mission.

As I sat there wrestling through some of these feelings, the

following words poured out, and I typed them as fast as I could on my phone:

*I'm on a mission to end missions.*

*You see I don't like that word 'missions,' and I haven't for some time. I don't like it because it separates this work that we do from our 'real' lives. By defining it, we make it a choice. Something we*

... it's all the same life—the good, the beautiful, and the ugly; the ups and downs; the highs and lows; the happy and the heartbreaking, the interesting and the seriously disturbing. And God can be found in all of it.

*can choose to do or not do, a project we can choose to get involved in or not. A trip we can choose to go on or not go on.*

*I used to think I had to separate everything . . .*

*keep my personal and fun life separate from my 'mission work.' Now I know that what's more authentic is embracing it all—the good and beautiful and the hard and ugly—all at the same time.*

*So that means one minute I'm posting an article on how women and young girls around the world are being forced into the sex trade, and the next post is happy faces with my kids on a ball field. What I've learned is that it's all the same life—the good, the beautiful, and the ugly; the ups and downs; the highs and lows; the happy and the heartbreaking, the interesting and the seriously disturbing. And God can be found in all of it. He is not absent.*

*I'm not saying I completely understand why God allows suffering, and I won't try to justify it with cliché answers. The truth is I'm not sure I will ever fully understand suffering, pain, and poverty; and most days, I simply can't stand it.*

*And while I want to scream over senseless shootings and murders and break down crying when I see children suffer because they have no food or water, I hold on to the only truth I know: that a day is coming when the world is made new, and I long for that new world.*

*But until then, my calling, your calling, and the calling of all who claim to follow Jesus Christ, should be to restore hope. No judging, just love. No handouts, but a hand out of poverty. No guilt, but true compassion that comes only from meeting people right where they are.*

*This is what it truly means to live out our faith.*

***It's not called missions—it's called life.***

I wrote those words more than six years ago, and yet, I feel them even more strongly today. Perhaps I would have spent a little more time to flesh them out and perfect the wording if I knew they were going to end up in a book. But, in essence, this is still what I believe and serves as the foundation of this book.

**It's not called  
missions—it's  
called life.**

But ending missions? Really? As the leader of a global “missions” organization, that might create a few problems. So, let me explain.

## WHAT IF?

First of all, let me be clear. I come from a long line of missions and ministry. Traditional missions has always been a part of my life, and I have a deep respect for the work that generations of missionaries have done to spread the hope of the gospel around the world. If it were not for them, I wouldn't be where I am or doing what I am doing today.

That being said, I do long for a *reimagining* of missions. I long for a reclamation of what's helpful and right and good, and a casting off of all the ways it has been co-opted or mismanaged.

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It is love—not disdain, or cynicism, or disrespect—behind my questions and criticisms. I believe if you truly love something, you long to see it healed. You long to see it whole and flourishing. I long to see missions transformed in a way that not only changes us, but changes the world.

Deconstruction has become such a trendy buzzword in recent years, especially when talking about faith. It seems as if everyone is “deconstructing” their faith these days, especially high-profile religious celebrities. And it seems like most deconstruction stories do not have happy endings.

But not all deconstruction is bad. Reevaluating our faith can be a good and healthy thing. Asking questions, challenging the status quo, and building a faith of our own can be beneficial. It can even, in the end, strengthen our faith. I believe deconstructing “missions” does not have to be a bad thing either.

The dictionary defines a missionary as:

- someone who attempts to convert others to a particular doctrine or program
- someone sent on a mission—especially a religious or charitable mission to a foreign country
- one who is to witness across cultures<sup>1</sup>

This, to me, is the traditional meaning of those words. But in the context of our faith and the original intent of Jesus, what should the definitions be?

What if missions is really more about truly loving our neighbors? What if it is more about teaching people how to live on earth, not just how to get to heaven? What if we didn't have to choose between the physical and spiritual when meeting people's needs? What if we didn't have to choose between social justice and salvation? What if it could really be about *both*?

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It's said that in order to change things and envision the future you desire, you have to start with the end in mind.<sup>2</sup> So, if we want the earth to look a little more like heaven, how will that change the way we live today? How will it change the way we do "missions" today?

Even though I have my own issues with the word, I don't want the way we do missions to be the punch line of a joke. I don't

<sup>1</sup> Vocabulary.com, s.v. "Missionary," accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/missionary>

<sup>2</sup> "Habit-2." FranklinCovey, December 28, 2022. <https://www.franklincovey.com/habit-2/>

want it to be a badge of honor or a check in the box of what good Christians do. I don't want it to be an internship of sorts to complete in order to be a "good Christian."

I want it to be a *way of life*—a way of life for a person of faith. The colors that paint a picture of what we believe for the world to see. We go to the ends of the earth not because we believe we are the heroes and not because God needs us to accomplish His work, but because it is an expression of the faith we say we take so seriously.

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It reminds me of what best-selling author Bob Goff said: "There's nothing wrong with matching shirts and wristbands. We just don't need them anymore . . . We don't need to go on 'missions trips'

any longer. Jesus's friends never called them this. They knew love already had a name."<sup>3</sup>

The truth is, Jesus never went on a mission trip, did He? But the way He loved and lived His life was something the world had never seen. Everywhere He went, lives were changed, people were healed, and hope was restored.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Goff, *Everybody, Always*, page 55.

When we forget about “missions” and call this what it really is—living out our faith—I believe a new, freeing world opens up to us. One that allows us to look at things differently, evaluate things differently, and live differently.

As a result of this small shift, we will see “mission trips” as simply an *exercise* of our faith, not the culmination. Our imaginations will ex-

pand beyond a single “missions emphasis week” at church and spill over into every day of the week, wherever we are. We won’t have to wait for

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the custom T-shirt to give us permission to go and make disciples. We won’t be satisfied with part-time faithfulness or waiting around for God to clean up the world. We will seek justice and healing and restoration of the world because, as children of God, we ourselves have been justified, healed, and restored. Instead of occasional volunteers, we will see ourselves as whole participants in the kingdom work of making the world new.

Missions is how we *live*. It should consume us in our homes, across the street, in our churches, in our places of work, and yes, in places of injustice around the world too. It should inspire us to seek human flourishing, to make wrong things right, and to bring the kingdom of God to the home we all share.

That is the story of World Help and the story behind our anchoring belief in “help and hope.” You see, we believe that

## BOTH

without food, access to clean water, and medicines that the body needs, the faith we profess means very little. But without faith that feeds the soul, meeting those physical needs is just a short-term fix. It's when you focus on both *body and soul* that true transformation happens in someone's life. It's when you meet the urgent physical and spiritual needs of today that hope has the space to dream of a better tomorrow.

And while some may refer to our work simply as “missions,” I challenge them to broaden their thinking and to open their eyes to what God intends for us to do and be. To see that changing the world comes not from how much we are involved in “missions” but from lives filled with love. This love is living and expansive. It naturally spills out from our homes to our neighborhoods, our communities, and around the world. A love that compels us to respond to the needs of our world with both help and hope.

Both. Never either/or. Never one or the other. It is the combination of meeting people's physical and spiritual needs that gives help for today and hope for tomorrow to people in need. *Both* is the secret that empowers us to live out our faith and truly change the world.



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